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Implementing Flipgrid for Speaking Practice during Emergency Remote Teaching

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a temporary shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) occurred in the 2020 Spring semester due to in-person university classes being cancelled. As an alternative to speaking practice in weekly English communication classes, students in 10 first- and second-year classes were assigned 10 weekly Flipgrid assignments in a shortened 12-week semester. Flipgrid is a free web application that can be used on a smartphone or desktop computer with a webcam. Students record an answer to a question or questions in video format and post it to a closed group that only their classmates and teacher can view. Flipgrid was chosen because it allowed students to practice speaking in front of their peers, although not in real-time. At the end of the semester, a survey was distributed to students in all classes about their experience using Flipgrid during ERT. Student responses were mostly positive to using Flipgrid as an alternative to practice speaking during ERT, though some students struggled using Flipgrid. After reading all student survey responses and reflecting on the semester, it was evident that assigning 10 Flipgrid assignments in 12 weeks was too much work for both students and the teacher.

Prior to the beginning of a new school year, teachers put forth great effort to prepare for the upcoming semester. They create curriculum, make extensive lesson plans, select textbooks or make their own original materials, and carefully plan out what they will teach each week. No teacher, however, is prepared for an emergency remote teaching (ERT) situation. ERT is a temporary shift of teaching in-person to an alternative mode of teaching due to crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). The primary objective in ERT

is not to re-create what is done during regular teaching circumstances, but instead “provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis” (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 6). Additionally, ERT involves fully remote teaching that would otherwise be done in a face-to-face situation. ERT is not the same as distance education, however. Distance education is described as the actual distance in time and/or space between learning resources and the learners themselves (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Distance education places emphasis on interactions between students through different means to allow them to become further engaged in the learning process (Moore, 1989; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers encountered a new, unprecedented challenge: how to abruptly shift their regular in-person lessons to distance, online-only environments within a matter of a weeks. It was a steep learning curve for both teachers and students, who were also surprised by the unexpected change, as to how lessons would take place. Teachers needed to swiftly decide how to shift activities, group discussions, projects, or other in-class tasks and activities to a remote online environment. For teachers in charge of communication English classes, one of the primary concerns was how would students have the opportunity to practice speaking English when they cannot be in an environment that promotes speaking practice? The way in which students would be able to practice speaking English was important to consider because the promotion of speaking fluency development in students’ second language (L2) development has been recognized to be important at all proficiency levels (Nation & Newton, 2008). This paper will explain how the application Flipgrid was implemented to give students the opportunity to practice

speaking English. Flipgrid was implemented in 10 first- and second-year university level English communication courses. Flipgrid is a free social-learning platform that allows students to practice speaking outside of the classroom. It allows teachers to ask a question, or series of questions in which students are able make a video response (Dubin et al., 2020). Over a shortened 12-week semester, each week students answered questions and interacted with their classmates using the Flipgrid application. At the end of the semester, students responded to an online survey created by the teacher and shared their opinions of using Flipgrid as an alternative to practice speaking during ERT. In this article I will discuss Flipgrid, how it was implemented during ERT, student reactions to using Flipgrid, the advantages and disadvantages of using Flipgrid in an ERT setting, and ideas of how to incorporate Flipgrid into classes in the future.

Flipgrid

Flipgrid is a Web 2.0 program that combines aspects of social media and video capture tools into one convenient space (McLain, 2018). One of the reasons Flipgrid was implemented was that it gives the students an opportunity to practice speaking English since they could not do so in a classroom environment. Especially in Japanese contexts, students do not have many opportunities to practice speaking English outside of the classroom. Another reason Flipgrid was implemented was because it is considered a low-stakes platform (Peterson et al., 2020) in which students could develop their speaking skills (McClure & McAndrews, 2016). A low-stakes situation allows students to attempt an assignment as many times as needed and make mistakes with minimal to no penalties on their final submitted assignment. Flipgrid is a free smartphone/desktop computer

application that can be downloaded from the Apple Store or Google Play. Students need a webcam or a smartphone with a camera to use it. There are two ways in which educators can set up Flipgrid for students. They can either upload a student roster via an excel file using student ID numbers or they can use university email addresses. For this semester, students used their university email account as it was easier to set up for the teacher and easier to access for the students. Once the students downloaded the Flipgrid application and entered their credentials, they were then able to access what is called a “Discussion”, which was set up prior to the start of the semester for each class. Each class had its own private discussion that only the students in that class and the teacher could view. The discussion contained weekly assignments for the students to complete. Assignments have a time limit which could be set from 1-minute to 10-minutes in length. All classes had assignments that ranged 3-minutes to 5-minutes.

Additionally, Flipgrid assignments can consist of questions for students to answer, a video to watch and respond to, or other types of media for the students to view and respond to. For my courses, students were tasked with answering questions on a weekly basis and replying to at least two of their classmates’ videos. Students can also interact with their classmates and reply to and like videos that their classmates create. Filters, stickers, backgrounds, and frames can be added to personalize individual videos. Students can also edit and/or re-record a video multiple times if they make a mistake while recording their video or are unhappy with how their video turned out. Being able to add stickers, customize their videos, and the ability to edit and/or re-record videos gives students a sense of ownership over what they are creating.

Implementing Flipgrid

The decision to implement Flipgrid was partly based on the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005), which states that output provides the ability to notice gaps between interlanguage and the target language, test hypotheses about the target language, and reflect on and modify language (Swain, 2005). Furthermore, meaning-focused output and fluency development (Nation, 2007) were important to consider because students were not able to attend weekly English classes. Flipgrid was implemented in 10 first- and second-year university classes, six of which were different levels. The levels ranged from Primary (around CEFR A2), Standard (around CEFR B1), Upper (around CEFR B2), and an elective communication class which was taken by motivated students who came from different levels. Over the course of the shortened 12-week semester, students had 10 weekly Flipgrid assignments. Each week's topic was related to topics in the course textbooks. The textbooks used for these courses were English Firsthand 1 and 2 (Pearson) for Primary classes, Smart Choice 3 (Oxford) and World English 2 (National Geographic) for Standard classes, World English 3 (National Geographic) for one Upper class, and Impact Issues 3 (Pearson) for the elective communication class. Topics in the textbooks ranged from environmental issues, lifestyle decisions, and gender roles among other topics. Over the course of the semester, the amount of time that students were required to speak for their Flipgrid assignments increased on a bi-weekly basis. For example, in week 2, students were asked to speak for 2-3 minutes and in week 4, the speaking time increased, and students were asked to speak for 3-4 minutes. In the final weeks of the semester, some classes were speaking for upwards of 5 minutes about the topics.

For each week's assignment, students were given a rubric for how their

speaking would be assessed. Students were assessed on details, performance, and time. The details section assessed whether students went into detail about the topic. This meant that they should not have simply answered the questions with a one sentence explanation, but also elaborated on their ideas and gave reasons for their answers. Additionally, student explanations were clear and easy to understand. The performance section assessed whether students used no notes at all or used notes sparingly, used some gestures, and did not read everything they wrote if they made notes. Finally, the time section assessed whether students spoke for the correct amount of time for the assignment. Of the three different criteria that the rubric assessed, the performance section was the most challenging section for the students. This was due to the fact that many students had never attempted this type of activity before. Many students were anxious about speaking English in front of their classmates, lacked confidence about their L2 speaking skills, did not want to record themselves speaking, or were concerned about making mistakes when speaking English. Because of this, many students prepared a transcript of what they would say prior to recording their video. This was common throughout all class levels. However, some students in the second-year standard classes, upper classes and some students in the conversation class were able to speak without the use of notes. Despite anxiety and the large number of students who used notes to alleviate their anxiety about speaking English, many of the students appeared to improve their speaking ability and some students even came to enjoy making the Flipgrid videos.

Student Responses to Using Flipgrid

Although there was some hesitation and apprehension among students at the beginning of the semester about Flipgrid, video recording themselves,

and anxiety about their peers seeing them speak English, the students ended up enjoying making their videos and some students' English noticeably improved. Throughout the semester, many students became more confident when speaking and appeared less anxious in their Flipgrid videos. A study by Hashim et al. (2019) concluded that using Flipgrid helped learners to develop self-confidence and to reduce speaking anxiety. Dunn (2012) reported a study on independent speaking using computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and advocated that lowering students' anxiety provided for an improvement in proficiency. At the end of the semester, students in all classes were given a written survey that I made on Google Forms which was distributed through a link on the learning management system. Students completed the survey in the final week of classes and roughly 98% of the students completed the survey. Students who submitted partially answered surveys or incomplete surveys did not receive credit for the assignment. I read student survey answers from every class as this helped me understand student opinions about using Flipgrid as well as other activities done throughout the semester. One question asked students about their experiences using Flipgrid. The question stated "Write about Flipgrid. How did you feel about using Flipgrid? Did you enjoy using it? Did it make you nervous? Did it give you confidence? What did you like most about Flipgrid? What did you like the least? Is there something you would have changed? If so, what? Be specific." The student response was largely positive to using Flipgrid as a way to practice speaking during ERT. One second-year student stated "At first, I was so nervous to take a video of myself since I have never done such as thing before but I gradually used to do it. Also, I really enjoyed my classmate's videos and I learned many things, such as how to make power point, how to use gestures and so on

from them. Furthermore, I feel like I have a confidence to speak English since I have been doing Flipgrid every week.” A first-year student said of Flipgrid, “I thought that Flipgrid was good. I can know everyone’s opinion about each topic. For example, technology, art, hobbies, TV and so on. It is so interesting. Also, it is good that I can see everyone. I learn a lot of things through Flipgrid.” Finally, a different second-year student said “I think that Flipgrid [*sic*] is indispensable for the growth of my speaking ability. At first, I was nervous because there were many new members in the English class. I was anxious because I was not confident, but as I gradually used the Flipgrid [*sic*], I became less nervous and confident.” Overall, the feedback from students about the use of Flipgrid as a way to practice speaking English was positive and students enjoyed using it to improve their speaking skills as well as interact with their classmates.

Despite the positive feedback, there were students who were not as positive about Flipgrid. A first-year student stated “I did not enjoy using Flipgrid. Because it took me about 5 hours to make a video. I have not been good at English since I was in junior high school.” A second-year student said of Flipgrid “I think that I spent much time to do Flipgrid in English homework because I did retake of my Flipgrid again and again. It made me very nervous and I felt sad when it didn’t go the way I wanted. Also, it was difficult for me to speak my opinion in English without notes.” Another first-year student said “To tell the truth, I was a little nervous to take a flipgrid. The reason why I was a little nervous to take it is because I have never taken such a video task by myself at school.” These comments show that although Flipgrid might be a practical alternative for students to practice speaking English outside of the classroom, it can be time-consuming and cause anxiety, especially for students who do not have confidence when

speaking English.

Discussion

Although the feedback from students was mostly positive, there were both advantages and disadvantages of implementing Flipgrid on a weekly basis for ERT for both students and myself. Some of the benefits included that it was easy to set up, and once the students learned how to use Flipgrid, it was easy for them to make and submit their weekly assignments. Students were also happy to interact and see their classmates, as they were unable to go to campus during the Spring semester. This was a practical alternative to regular classes for students to get to know their classmates, despite the interactions not being in real-time. Even though many students stated that they were intimidated by Flipgrid at the start of the semester, by the end of the semester they admitted that they enjoyed using it to interact with their classmates, hear how their classmates spoke English, and help improve their own English. For myself, it was a useful way to assess how students were doing with their L2 usage. Giving students weekly feedback helped many students improve their speaking skills and allowed me to communicate to students what they were doing well and what needed improvement. One student even stated “But, the thing I like the most is Mr. Brian’s feedback. It encouraged me and helped us to keep my motivation!” Of course, not all students felt this way, and many students felt that Flipgrid was a great deal of work and was quite time-consuming.

As mentioned in student comments, some students spent hours working on their 3-5-minute video. Other students had problems with their internet connection or had to remake their videos multiple times because of technological problems. Additionally, 10 3-5-minute Flipgrid videos is a lot of

work for students who do not speak the L2 fluently. Students had Flipgrid assignments from the first to the tenth week of the semester and it became quite time consuming for them. This was especially the case for second-year students as they were asked to speak for longer amounts of time than first-year students. From a teacher's perspective, it was also an immense amount of work. Grading student Flipgrid assignments took an entire week to grade just the Flipgrid assignments, not including other assigned homework, and came to be a huge undertaking during the shortened semester. One of the reasons grading assignments was so time consuming was because I watched every student's video and gave each student individualized feedback based on the previously mentioned rubric. It was important for students to receive personalized feedback to help improve specific areas of their speaking abilities, but ultimately, it was just too much work for one person to attempt in such a short amount of time.

Conclusion

Flipgrid was implemented during ERT in 10 first- and second-year university classes over the course of a shortened 12-week semester. Students were mostly positive about using the application and although some students initially felt uncomfortable using Flipgrid, they became accustomed to how it worked, and many students enjoyed using it. An advantage of implementing Flipgrid was not only did it facilitate social learning, but it helped students learn how to create their own video content. This is especially useful in a time when many young people create digital video content on platforms such as YouTube and Tik Tok (Stoszowski, 2018). Some students even said that they felt that using Flipgrid was similar to being a Youtuber.

Having used Flipgrid previously at a different university where I taught English communication, students were assigned a maximum of six Flipgrid assignments over the course of a normal 15-week semester. Despite wanting students to have many opportunities to speak and use English as much as possible, assigning 10 Flipgrid assignments to students during a 12-week semester, in hindsight, was far too much work for both students and me. As I will continue to use Flipgrid in the future, I plan to assign a maximum of five or six assignments over the course of a normal semester as, from previous experience, this seemed like an appropriate amount of work. Of course, no one is prepared for ERT and there is a learning curve for all involved when re-planning a semester's worth of material in less than a two-week timeframe. Ultimately, it was neither the best or the worst teaching circumstances, but the most important takeaway from this ERT semester was that students were still able to practice their English-speaking skills and many of them improved. After all, allowing students to practice their L2 as much as possible is one of the main objectives for language teachers, whether it occurs during ERT, or in the classroom.

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